



[Valentina Tereshkova](#)

Caste, Class or Sex?

Evelyn Reed is the author of the 1975 book “Woman’s Evolution”. Unfortunately it is not on the Internet. “Women - Caste, Class or Oppressed Sex” (1970), the essay attached and linked below, contains some of the ideas that were included in the longer work.

Our picture today is of [Valentina Tereshkova](#), the first woman in space, from the Soviet Union, on 16 June 1963.

Reed writes of “the downfall of women” as if it was a single historic event, which, from the point of view of the “metropolitan” or advanced capitalist countries, it appears to be. Of course Reed was aware, like [Engels](#), that there were still contemporary societies existing on earth which had not

yet experienced, or fully experienced, the full downfall of women. The downfall has in practice been a long cascade, which is not yet at an end.

The downfall of women is real. It corresponds exactly with the arrival of class-divided society, with its institutions of the patriarchal family, private property and state power. This is what Engels expressed so clearly in 1884, following on from the work of Henry Morgan and Karl Marx. Evelyn Reed does not contradict Engels, but her work opened up the story in more detail.

In “Woman’s Evolution” Reed shows how nearly all the productive technologies that humans still use today for basic survival, from horticulture and animal husbandry to pottery, weaving and leatherwork, and including building, and the use of fire, originated in the sphere of the women, which was the human settlement itself.

In this short essay, Reed makes the basic case for the historical and materialist view of human life, from which proceeds an integrated understanding of the entire society of men and women together, and the consequent necessity for socialism. After that, she contrasts and compares with some of her contemporary opponents of forty years ago, whose arguments were similar to those of the bourgeois feminists of today in South Africa. Here are some excerpts from the essay:

“Under the clan system of the sisterhood of women and the brotherhood of men there was no more possibility for one sex to dominate the other than there was for one class to

exploit another. Women occupied the most eminent position because they were the chief producers of the necessities of life as well as the procreators of new life."

"Woman's overthrow went hand in hand with the subjugation of the mass of toiling men to the master class of men."

"Women, then, have been condemned to their oppressed status by the same social forces and relations which have brought about the oppression of one class by another, one race by another, and one nation by another. It is the capitalist system - the ultimate stage in the development of class society - which is the fundamental source of the degradation and oppression of women."

"...to say that women form a separate caste or class must logically lead to extremely pessimistic conclusions with regard to the antagonism between the sexes in contrast with the revolutionary optimism of the Marxists. For, unless the two sexes are to be totally separated, or the men liquidated, it would seem that they will have to remain forever at war with each other. As Marxists we have a more realistic and hopeful message. We deny that women's inferiority was predestined by her biological makeup or has always existed."

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Women - Caste, Class or Oppressed Sex?, Reed, 1970](#).
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